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ABSTRACT

The idea of establishing some form of exchange among student debaters from the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) grew out of the participation of California State University (CSU) (Northridge) in the 1987 debates in Montreal between American and Canadian universities. Since CSU Northridge was in the process of expanding its academic relationships with universities in the PRC, training in argumentation and debate appeared to offer a unique opportunity to contribute further to Chinese education. A tournament was scheduled for January 1989. The setting provided for each team to debate once on the affirmative and once on the negative in non-decision encounters. After the conclusion of all the debates the American judges met to select the top four Chinese teams and top four individual Chinese debaters. The Chinese critics similarly selected the American award winners. Factors which may limit the diffusion of debate in China include the expense of hosting a tournament, politically sensitive issues, the highly conservative personality of the Chinese, and the weak networks of communication between some universities. It seems probable that the diffusion of both debate and democracy will go hand-in-hand. (MG)

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The Diffusion of Debate to China

by

Mark Woolsey
Fresno City College

Nancy Perry
Don Brownlee
California State University, Northridge

CS506993

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Diffusion of Debate to China

This paper involves a summary of the history and events surrounding the First Sino-American Debate Tournament. In addition, the paper examines the potential for the expansion of debate in the People's Republic of China.

HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

The idea for establishing some form of exchange among student debaters from the United States and the People's Republic of China grew out of CSU Northridge's participation in the 1987 debates in Montreal between American and Canadian universities. These Montreal debates suggested that the traditional international exchange involving one team touring another country was not the sole possibility. A large number of schools, in this case 24, could be involved in one event, an interaction that focused less on winning than on learning from each other.

Since CSU Northridge was in the process of expanding its academic relationships with universities in the PRC, training in argumentation and debate appeared to offer a unique opportunity to further contribute to Chinese education. The university provided funding to produce a videotape of a sample Lincoln-Douglas debate to distribute to the 12 Chinese campuses with which CSUN had formal relations. The tape included in Chinese an introductory explanation of the format and objectives of debate.

Five of the campuses expressed interest in participating in some form of debate exchange, with Shaanxi Teachers University in Xi'an offering to host a tournament among Chinese and American

students. As CSUN's President wished to keep the exchange within the CSU system, all campuses with active debate programs were invited to join us in the exchange and eight system campuses -San Diego, Fullerton, Los Angeles, San Luis Obispo, Fresno, San Jose, San Francisco and Sacramento - chose to join the tour. Each campuses had to pay its own part of the expenses.

The tournament was scheduled for early January, 1989, when the American debaters had ample time both to participate in debates and visit several sites in China. Five possible issues for the debates were selected by the American side as prospective topics. The host institution chose the role of the United Nations in Third World development, an issue that would not cause political difficulties for the Chinese. The debates were scheduled to be held using English.

OBJECTIVES OF THE DEBATES

It is probable that those involved in the debates had several different objectives for their participation. In addition to the unique opportunity to visit the People's Republic of China, the Americans viewed the debates as an opportunity to help diffuse the concept of intercollegiate debate, training in critical thinking, and the discipline of speech communication to another country where this activity was entirely unknown. On a secondary level, this also seemed a way of introducing and encouraging a more democratic form of decision making in the nation.

Any statement about the objectives of the Chinese faculty and students must be partly speculative. It is probable that the Chinese did not view the tournament as a political event, inspiring

the democratic movement in the country. Rather, the faculty representatives from the Chinese universities seemed more concerned with the debates as a means of teaching and motivating their students to learn English.

THE DEBATES

Most of the rules for the debates were not firmly established until a few days before the American delegation arrived in Xi'an. The "tournament" was structured so as to provide for the least degree of competitive tensions as possible. The setting provided for each team to debate twice against two different teams from the other nation. Each team would debate once on the affirmative and once on the negative.

The debates were non-decision encounters. Though a four-person judging panel, two American and two Chinese professors, listened to each debate, no winner or loser was chosen. Rather, both an American and a Chinese judge provided a brief oral critique to the audience, focusing on helping the audience understand the strategies and techniques of debating, not necessarily concentrating on the topic. After the conclusion of all debates the American judges met to select the top four Chinese teams and top four individual Chinese debaters. The Chinese critics similarly selected the American award winners.

The debates were held in two locations - a 1000 seat auditorium and a 100 seat lecture room. Each team debated at least once in the larger facility. Both rooms were standing-room-only, with Chinese students lined up outside the doors to take the place of anyone leaving the debate. For whatever reasons, there was a

steady flow of Chinese students into and out of each location between speeches. For the first two debates in the auditorium, television stations from Beijing and Shanghai, the two most prominent stations in China, provided taped coverage of the proceedings. Local city and province television coverage was present, as well.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DIFFUSION OF DEBATE

Everett Rogers (1983) pioneering work in the diffusion of innovations identifies several factors as contributing to the success of any effort. These factors include attributes of the innovation, adopter characteristics, and communication networks. Each of these considerations is likely to have a significant impact on the immediate diffusion of academic debating among universities in the People's Republic of China.

According to Rogers, important attributes of an innovation are its relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. These factors contribute to between "49 and 87 percent of the variance in the rate of adoption" (232).

Compared to other means of teaching English, the tournament held in Xi'an was incredibly expensive. The Chair of the Department of English at Shaanxi Teachers University indicated that the total host costs were close to $8000, the equivalent of the annual salaries of 17 full-time faculty. Even normal American tournaments may cost several thousand dollars to run. No Chinese university has the resources to pay these host costs or pay for the transportation, housing, fees, etc. associated with attending such tournaments on anything but an exceptional basis. Intercollegiate

competition in China will at best be limited to intra-city events until resources are more readily available in the distant future.

Most of the other factors favor the diffusion of debate. The Chinese appeared to be highly competitive. This is demonstrated both through the comparative testing inherent in promotion through the Chinese academic system and the behavior of the Chinese debaters. Losing face, however, is of considerable concern, so that situations for debating must involve minimum risk to face. The non-decision debates in this tournament tended to succeed in that goal.

Tournament debating generally need not be very complex. Almost any university can easily handle the technical arrangements for a small tournament. The basic structure of debates is also simple enough that Chinese students can begin argument without elaborate background. Excepting the expense, debates are comparatively easy to attempt or even observe. Thousands of Chinese students were able to view at least one debate during this tournament. By comparison to a training method available only through a computer, a rare commodity in China, public debates can provide immediate access to as many as can fit into the debating location.

Besides the cost, a few additional obstacles do exist. There are a large number of topics that are unacceptable as subjects for debate or that involve politically sensitive issues. Even the topic for the next Sino-American debates, that nuclear weapons are the greatest single threat to world peace, holds the potential for controversy. One recent article (Rummel, 1988) on nuclear warfare

compared the possible destruction to that done by authoritarian regimes throughout history. Included are several examples of mass killings during the 40 years of communist leadership in China. It was judged that copies of the article could not safely be sent to the Chinese universities without possibly incriminating the recipients in anti-government activity. This aspect of the potential adopter makes diffusion more difficult. In addition, the Chinese personality appears to be highly conservative, viewing change as hazardous. Risk-taking is not common without government consent. This personality variable argues against rapid diffusion of any innovation.

The networks of communication are, likewise, important to diffusion. The five schools involved in these debates are all from less influential parts of the nation. Xi'an and Harbin are relatively large cities, but they are far removed from Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou, the cultural, economic, and political centers of China. Xining, home of Qinghai Normal University, is in a highly rural section of China. Since these five schools are at best on the periphery of Chinese educational leadership, diffusion will be slowed.

CONCLUSION

The intent of CSU Northridge is to continue the Sino-American Debates with competition at several locations (including the WSCA Convention) in California in February, 1990. At the moment three of the Chinese universities have expressed their commitment to attend, if the PRC government provides exit passports. A Taiwanese university has also indicated interest in participating, making for

the possibility of a truly historic event. Xi'an Foreign Language University has offered to host the Third Sino-American Debates, probably in 1991.

The fact that the events at Tiananmen Square quickly followed the introduction of intercollegiate debate to China is certainly only coincidental. Both events, however, are linked. Training in argumentation and debate can only expose Chinese students to such concepts as questioning authority, recognizing fallacious reasoning, etc. It is inherently a step, be it a small one, towards to democratization of China. It seems probable that the diffusion of both debate and democracy will go hand-in-hand.

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